

STEPS, STYLE, AUTHENTICITY AND “KAVANA” IN ISRAELI FOLKDANCE

BY ELLIOT COHEN

Most of us folkdance lovers, dance for the fun of it. We like the movement, the music, the people. Yet, we also enjoy dancing well and we look for meaning.

Certainly dancing a dance well implies dancing its steps precisely. In a nice article about recreational folkdance (“Dancemagazine”, Dec. 1957, reprinted in “Guide for the Israeli Folkdance Teacher”), Fred Berk has shown that though, if allowed to turn into an obsession, this quest for precision could spoil the fun of it all. Let us start from this article to go on and indicate some of the ways of making folkdance more enjoyable, meaningful and exciting to the practising folkdancer.

Not that steps are not important, we agree with Fred Berk that “of course a dance should be taught the way it was originally done”. Only we take this demand of exactness for granted, feeling it is an obvious one, we would like to go it past it and not turn it into an end in itself. Let us remember, incidentally, that many obstacles stand in the way of this “authenticity” (Gary Fox, “Hora”, issue 28), and that for all our efforts we are liable to teach with mistakes. We have witnessed teachers center their whole teaching on this, only to find out later that hardly a dance they taught did not need correction. In another instance a choreographer couldn’t stand the rigid way a teacher taught her dances in spite of that teacher’s absolute precision. So, though precision is essential, emphasis should be shifted away from it.

Where then should the emphasis be? Part of the answer lies in a project initiated by Fred Berk in his article “A Research Project” (“Hora”, issues 28, 31). There he traced the origin of some dances and the circumstances of their birth. Certainly not every dance has an interesting history, but it is hard to believe that some new dances are born because a folkdancer learns the steps from dance instructions in a record with reversed labels, or that some professional choreographers create at such speed to the recordings they’ve made of the radio program while they were at work, that they inadvertently choreograph to the commercial

of “Stein, Stein, Bira Kala” as well. Still, many more dances than one would think do have a nice history, and it is nice to know it.

Another part of the answer lies in understanding the purpose of the steps. Every choreographer, somehow, somewhere, makes choices at each step and we like to believe that all the choreographers have made their choices with intention, that is with “Kavana”. In her beautiful study, “The New Israeli Folkdances” (1968, p. 11) Gurit Kadman wrote “nearly all our dances are connected with one specific song, but with the tune only, not the content of the words”, an idea expressed again recently by E. Halper (“Viltis”, Vol. 41, No. 6, p. 14).

Yet, many more dances than one would think do indicate signs of “Kavana”, and many are related to the words of the song. Indeed it may be a proper place here and a useful enterprise to give several examples of dances containing steps with specific “Kavana”, while adding to Fred Berk’s research by giving the origin of some more dances.

Already in the example selected by G. Kadman one can single out “El Ginat Egoz”, where the dancers make the shape of a nut with their left hand. In “Sham Harei Golan”, in the second part of this dance, Yonathan Gabai has used a Rond de jambe with high knee symbolizing a climbing step, to be done with erect body. In the first part of “Va’yiven Uziyahu”, the bounces are made in a “massive” way, in reference to the fortified towers of King Uziyahu.

As for “Ken Yovdu” (note that a strong stamp of L. over R. and not a brush should follow the step together step), G. Kadman has noted in her study that her dance incorporates the idea of “formation of the ancient biblical “Machanayim” (2 camps)” — two opposite lines ‘attacking one another’. This dance was created upon Gurit’s return from the USA. The State of Israel had been established during her absence and she at once created “Ken Yovdu” for rows of soldiers dancing in front of a huge silk background representing a red and golden sunset.

The second part of the spirited "Debka Hashalom" represents rows of soldiers happily returning home, while the third (the squat accompanied by the shout 'Hey') represents the soldiers meeting and greeting in joy. Such meetings on the way frequently occur in Israel, in particular because "tramp" (hitch hiking) is so widespread.

In her wonderfully sensitive "Al Kol Ele" Rivka has introduced, among other things, a slow turn in 4 counts, meaning "all those things about us", and, in the third part, a strong step referring to the injunction in the song: "Don't Uproot What Has Been Planted".

In "Eretz-Eretz", composed by S. Bachar and Y. Levy (On the doorsteps of Yankele's pleasant home in Kiryat Bialik), the choreographers have ended the dance by a salute to the left, then to the right and a bow of "toda" to God. We now turn to four couple dances by Eliyahu Gamliel, another choreographer who takes into account the words of the songs. At the Beginning of "Ayelet Ahavim", the man asks the woman why she is sad and because the relationship is yet shy and distant, this part is danced with the hands in the back. The woman tells the story of her lover, who has left and promised to return. Little by little contact develops, as the man draws the woman to him, then conversely, before they dance together. It is a dance of consolation.

In "Shnei Shoshanim" the two roses are symbolized by the arms of the dancers held together like a cup that crosses in a "W"-like way. In "Hakol Biglal Ha'ahava", a man writes to his beloved that were he a bird, he would fly to her. . . but he is just a simple soldier and can only send a letter. Part two of the dance starts with a 3-step turn to the R. ending with a bending forward of the body as L. touches next to R., before turning widely to the L. — a sequence calling to mind a bird that folds up before taking off.

Finally, in "Hagashashim", counts 1-4 of part 1 depict the snobish girl referred to in the song, walking nose up, hands in the back, ignoring all that is around her. The man, behind, mimics and makes fun of her.

Another humorous touch can be found in Y. Gabay's 'Beyt Chalomotai': the girl describes to her boyfriend the house of her dreams in a charming way, saying she'll allow only the one man she wants to live in it. This teasing is alluded to when the couple separates on 4 running steps, body slightly bent forward, and look at each other under their arms extended to the side.

In the first 8 counts of "Shkharkhoret", of Yankele Levy

the girl's left arm is resting on the man's right arm. When the couple then moves 3 steps forward, the man interlocks his arm under the girl's, inviting her to accompany him. Very delicate hand gestures can be found in Sa'adya Amishai's dances, in particular in the popular "Mi Li Yiten". Here also, they always have a specific "Kavana".

Several dances incorporate religious gestures, such as the sways with arms up in "Tsadik Katamar". The ending turn in "Dror Yikra" is done with arms in a horizontal 1/2 circle, as if holding shabbat candles between two fingers. In the middle part we find the following powerful step: strong and wide lean to the right, step left in place, cross R. over L., high hop on R. and squat with erect body, this, in Eliyahu's mind expresses man's quest for freedom and elevation. Though he fails and is drawn back to earth, it is dignified.

Other dances, while not literally related to the words, will incorporate original steps from the Israeli ethnic communities. Coming first to mind is the celebrated "Dodi Li", the first Israeli dance to use the Yemenite step, a step Rivka had seen at that time (1949) in Yemenites dancing upon their arrival in Israel ("Shorashim", p. 18) In the chorus of this dance we also find a prayer-like movement: counts 7-8: step forward on L., then close R. to L., 10-11: step backward on L. then close R. to L., on the first 2 counts body bends slightly backwards and hands are brought close to the face, palms forward, like in a tefila. In the last 2 counts hands are brought down. We owe it to the composer Nira Khen that this dance could become alive since Rivka had almost given up the hope of finding proper music for her completed dance.

In "Mezarey Israel" Shalom Hermon used two steps he had seen at a festival shortly after independence: The "Cherkassia" step, in 6 counts (counts 2 and 5 should be stamping on the R. and L. respectively while kicking the other foot forward.), as well as a step the Druze use to warm up: counts 1-8 of part 2 are close: L. foot to R. (1-2). Then with L. heel in place, open L. foot to L. (3-4), close it to R. (5-6), then turn it out to L. (7-8). Moshiko has explained in "Shorashim" (p. 51) how his "Debka Kna'an" uses the Arab tradition of incorporating between each stanza a chorus allowing the dancers to rest.

Here then are some examples of steps with a specific "Kavana", a list that in no way claims to be complete.

If we know its history, a dance will no longer be "yet another dance" and that if we know the "Kavana" of steps, (to be sure not every step will have a specific "Kavana"),

we will never dance the dance the way we did before. In short, this understanding will help the dance grow in us, become unique, and become a pleasure to dance time and again.

For some choreographers, such as Ra'aya Spivack, Moshe Eskayo and Moshiko, dances are created for their own sake or to create an atmosphere, not to tell a story. Yonathan Gabay's "Yedid Nefesh" is such a dance, just a waltz. "Ma Navu", Ra'aya's first dance, was created as an Israeli dance in the Yemenite tradition. That the dance, as well as the music by her husband Yossi, were then considered as authentic Yemenite material by Sara Levy-Tanay and Yehezkel Braun pleased her considerably, since it proved wrong those who, at the time (1955), thought that the gap couldn't be bridged between the Mizrahi and the Ashkenazi communities in Israel (Ra'aya and Yossi are of Ashkenazi origin). Later Ra'aya composed her popular "Niguno Shel Yossi" (the dance coming before the music, and the words last) as well as the other "Yossele dances" ("Ele Chamda Libi", "Chiribim"), all in the Ashkenazic, but not Chassidic tradition. They all have in common dancing each time with the second next partner and using only walking steps and step-kicks.

Moshe Eskayo doesn't tell any story in his stylized "Debka Ud". It is not a war dance and there is no sabre in the third part. However, in her "Hoshet Yad Lashalom", Ra'aya did use a thrust forward with the arm to mean rejection of war and Eskayo took heed of the words of "Layla" to give his dance a sad connotation.

We still have to touch upon style: trained dancers can control all their muscles and with a minimum of exertion should be able to reproduce perfectly all the steps. For others, patience, time, practice and learning to look will be

necessary.

But there are general considerations which, if taken into account, will enhance our enjoyment of the dance and may help the dances keep their individuality. One such is neatness (make a step with high knee a step with high knee). Another is contrast: the first part of "Ken Yovdu" is done with the dancers close to each other, while the second part is wider, happier and freer; similarly in "Be'er Bassadeh" (second part wide, third part smaller); as in "Vaynikhou", a dance Gil Aldema requested from Ra'aya, as certain choreographers were tampering with his music, to make it an easy 4/4, and in which she wanted to popularize a step of Yonathan Karmon (the two kicks back, done with legs extended), where the movement is vertical in the first part in contrast to the second part, which covers ground.

Contrast can also be in the step itself. The love dance "Livavteenee" will be flat if the waltz step is not done properly: first step down, second and third up. It can be in the intensity of the phrasing: "Tzion Tamati" will be flat if the the second phrase of part 1 (with snaps) and of the second part (with brush) are not accented, in opposition to the quiet first phrases of those parts.

Another consideration is accomplishing a progression, like in the second part of "Vayiven Uziyahu", walk, walk (while clapping the hands to your right, body erect), go, go, run, run. Another is sharpness in changing directions, like in "Dodi Li", the dances of Ze'ev Havatzelet, the Debkot, and many others. Still another is paying attention to the pauses in the dance and music and also to the 'respirations' (preparations before the actual step). But here we are getting close to feeling, expression and what Melissa Hayden (among others) calls dancing musically, a point which is part of another wider discussion. □

* "Hora" is a bulletin published from time to time by the American Zionist Youth Foundation's Israel Folk Dance Institute, New York.

* "Shorashim" by Judith Brin-Ingber is issue nr. 59 of Dance Perspectives, published in New York, 1974.

* Fred Berk's works were published by the Israel Folk Dance Institute in New York.